Mother Earth

By Adam Fieled

Preface

The canon of quality English-language poetry about mothers and motherhood is very small. Wordsworth venerated childhood and the souls of children; about the souls of mothers, he was more mum. His Prelude narrates his childhood, but his parents' perspective is elided. One impulse behind the composition of this narrative sonnet sequence, Mother Earth, is to create a palimpsest over Wordsworth; rather than the child being father of the man (or woman), the mother being (in some ways) the father of the child. The couple who dominate the sequence, Ronnie and Jess, are an odd couple par excellence— Ronnie, the stumblebum stoner poet/artist; and workaday, conventionally responsible Jess, who once harbored artistic aspirations but had them beaten out of her. They settle together on Staten Island, New York— an unglamorous locale, without any specific hinge to the arts or even to lower forms of culture. What Staten Island looks like, its malls and bars, constitutes one hook offered by Mother Earth; Staten Island functions as a synecdoche of an uncaring human landscape. Neither Ronnie nor Jess are rampant materialists— though Ronnie fantasizes about being a rock star and Jess has creature comforts in mind at all times (especially as her pregnancy develops).

Ronnie's aimlessness has not only to do with his own lazy escapist tendencies, but with the psychological impediment of being in a purgatorial world, where cultural pursuits are perpetually and brutally devalued. Though Jess sees in Ronnie possibilities developed which she abandoned, her pregnancy forces her to think practically and, to Ronnie's naïve and selfish way of seeing things, anti-culturally. To raise a child, Jess comes to the conclusion that she must give up her own childishness, which Ronnie is always eager to exteriorize for her. He himself is too much of a child to raise a child. The reason I chose to lend Mother Earth a metaphysical edge (Jess's angel/dream sequence) is because the metaphysical impinges on human life more than the masses tend to believe— people do have clairvoyant dreams, visions, and brushes with other levels of reality. Jess is no intellectual, and neither is Ronnie. Neither are fundamentally skeptical.

On another level, the Ronnie masturbation sequence is meant to be intimate and human, rather than prurient or grotesque— a reminder that there are still facets of human life which serious literature will not touch. It just so happens that Ronnie's elaborate masturbation routine is not uncommon for adult men— neither are the props he uses, or his discomfort on being caught in the act. James Joyce, with Leopold Bloom in Ulysses, almost got to this; but he stopped short. Certainly English-language poetry has never been near this terrain before— the attempts by poets like Ginsberg and Bukowski are so callow and undercooked as to seem jejune in comparison. If Mother Earth has an undercooked level, it may be merely its brevity; the fact that the narrative never fully resolves. I have not ruled out writing a sequel. To explore what Ronnie's life when he returns to Wisconsin must be like might be interesting— whether he can shape up enough to ever create again. Mother Earth does not cast judgment on Ronnie's artistic abilities, or lack thereof; specifically, Jess does not. Depending on how you parse the text, he does not have to be an anti-hero. Conversely, nor does Jess need to be a heroine; if she has the courage to reject Ronnie, she may find that things drag and she misses his joie de vivre. The ambiguities which animate Mother Earth fight the notion of a simple "mother's triumph" narrative, with all its formulaic, feministic overtones— though the shoe fits that way, too. And happily.

Adam Fieled, 2013-2021

#1

Yes, this is how it must be, high up;
there is no earth in this pitted wood.
Stoli, Captain Morgan's, especially;
all taste clear, brackish, bring sweets.
Beneath flesh, digested meats;
she's expecting, wants me to die.
If I'm dead, I drink to this death.
If I live, I curse her stomach, too.
There is little else to do. New York:
a crust of bread that crumbles, spits.
When I take her, I take an island:
all streets split to flush us into it.
There's a steep price for this shit.
Our low-down: reverse mountains flake.

#2

Listen, now that I've got you alone I need
to break a few things to you. You think
this guy is going to make a responsible
father? Look how shiny these shoes are,
and you know why? I took the time to
have them shined. This guy has hands
that shake, eyes that dart, lips that curl,
and it's all because he can't take care of
himself. You think having two kids at
once is going to be glamorous? Do you
really have that much of a martyr complex?
Please, here's another Diet Coke, I know
this isn't fun for you, especially because you
have to cab it back to the subway. I'll pay.

#3

Look: the boy-child sleeps. Of course, he left
a cigarette in the ash-tray; sudden death's here.
I take his sleeping hands, place them on my
belly, just so he knows, at least somewhere in
the dense green fog of his existence, what's about
to happen. My breasts are watermelons, it's sick.
His hands are limp. I'm damp: I still want this man
(if he can be called a man, if that bald pate signifies).
To think, that all he's swallowed in this are lies.
Of course, tiny streaks of spit mar his pillow.
I bought them of course, and their blueness works.
He'll leave me lit too, and wanting a real father.
Yet, do I take the blame for this hideousness? Yes.
Two babes are sleeping while I get undressed.

#4

Truth is, he's only half-asleep. He left
the cigarette in the ashtray, hoping the
place would burn down: he's a terrorist.
She's the fattest woman he's ever kissed.
But, as she lies her hefty bones beside him,
there is tenderness that wells up softly.
If he opens his eyes, he falls deeply, again.
Outside, slush builds up, brown, grey.
The blue Hudson signals from beyond.
Nighttime is not a time to go someplace.
It's a common human race scenario;
with a pregnant wife, you do not go.
Now, she snores, he flips the spit-stained
pillows, laid stiff like a cadaver, ashamed.

#5

Do their dreams coalesce? His dreams are still, blue:
girls in their youths, pliant limbs, bright eyes, smooth.
In dreams like this he doesn't have to move, they do it.
Long languorous lays on beaches, he digs deep for it.
There is no risk as the spray hits him, here to eternity.
But crosses dangle mysteriously from blank blue skies—
each one slightly different to the others, asks repentance.
So he pumps as her face changes (this one, that one),
confesses to it as he finishes, reaches for a drink, it ends.

It's 4 a.m.: if there is a wolf at this hour, it's him.
In the dim light, her frame repulses him swiftly.
His mind explodes with exploded possibilities,
all the how things used to be that never were.
That spit on the pillow should've been for her.

#6

Poor guy that he is, he sits on the toilet, not needing
to shit. He thinks if he pushes his bowels hard enough
(especially with all the Heineken in him) something'll come.
Truth is, he just likes the idea of flushing parts of himself.
The shit comes from within, so that's less of him exists.
Yanking up his boxers, he looks in the wall-length mirror.
A wraith, more or less emaciated, looks back. No one to
watch over him but many, many to subjugate, withhold,
deny, supplant, stymie, titillate, vex, disturb, outfox.
His eyes are his best feature: stark raving mad sapphire. They
glow in the dark, an old girlfriend used to say, they dazzle.
He sits on the toilet with the seat up, enjoying being
pointless (not just pointless but profoundly pointless, that's
the thing, a beacon of pointlessness, a pointed husk.)

#7

He figures he might as well smoke outside.
My lady, he speaks, doth need no smoke.
But it's cold and he thinks, who cares?
Each drag mixes with the final beer buzz
in a sweet, maudlin, *I'm doing this* haze.
Yes, the father smokes, drinks, reveals
the good Irish taste not to hide these things.
Succulent, how hazy his mind is in miasma.
The calendar on the kitchen wall has some
tart on it, stretching her parts like rubber bands.
Maybe she's the one from his dream? She may
as well have been. He's a father, he's past this
stuff. Still, the old hangman's itch hits him at
such an angle that it's back to the bathroom.

#8

His erection juts, but fades as he vigorously pumps. Feeling knavish, he runs to the kitchen, takes the calendar off the wall and, in his drunken sense, it seems perfect to rub the picture on his crotch. As he does, he stands, and the baby's tears and his intense drunkenness and his lover's fat ass and the tart's large breasts move him so much that when he finally finishes it is with such emotion that he barely notices a few words coming from the bedroom. He finishes, makes a wad of toilet paper to sponge off himself, the sink (he used soap this time), the formica counter, bits of puddle on the floor, all doused with such reckless extravagance that he gets proud all over again (she's saying something about coming here, now).

#9

Erection just beginning to subside, he glides
like an ice skater into the bedroom, sheepish.
He had seen from the bathroom's light all
the angles and creases of her careworn face.
What bothered her was facing her breath.
At this hour, the wrinkles make it like death.
Please, God, one or the other, not both.
His stealth has won him nothing, as he kneels.
He rests his elbows on the navy blue sheets.
There it is: the reek, combined with the ways
she tries to combat it: Crest, Listerine, floss.
He is still seeing the calendar girl's sleekness.
There is richness in having both, until he sees
that there is really only one he has, and wants.

#10

He's getting hard again, and wants to take her, just for
the hell of it. But she moans about his errant ways, and
she even knows what he's done with the calendar that
remains doused near the bathroom sink, laid sideways.
He is someone who crawls, but he's being babied here.
She looks at him and sees so much to love, from distances.
But this right up close angle makes him ten pounds richer
with white and black and red and blue scum. She's a bitch,
she knows that but this man carries on (she can't believe
he's sitting here kneeling as if in a pew, will he just please
get in bed?) as if the world was pure shoots and ladders.
She splits her mind into before him and after, and now
realizes it's just her breath, so makes a slight shift back.
Still, he won't climb in, though he knows she wants it.

#11

He intertwines his fingers behind his head, not having listened.
Since he doesn't drive, there has to be a set up for water breakage.
He thinks of waves breaking on beaches under tropical moons.
He wants to sip pina coladas, or just to dive in the Hudson.
That time when he was five, his Dad took him on a boat into
Lake Michigan, there was big blueness all around, he saw spirits.
He told his Dad and his Mom and his brother but no one believed
him. Plus, all those songs about water, waves, tides, thunderstorms;
what if he were to be washed up into a cyclone in the Hudson?
What if all this were just a dream, and his crying penis was neither
crying nor a penis but just some puppet from Sesame Street let
loose into his life to make mischief among big birds, elephants?
Not that he wasn't completely looking forward to all these
challenges; just that now that he's thwarted, he can't sleep.

#12

I need a chauffer, please, to help me through this.
Every time I enter one of these trains, I see one of
these spic hustlers sticking a needle into my guts.
Look, it's the fat pregnant lady, everyone, far too
old to be doing this, but doing it anyway. Hours
of typing, hours and hours, just for these lawyers.
It's always briefs that sound more official than
me and my child. Husband is too strong a word.
Me and the girls go down to the Midtown Deli,
and in my head I say, I'll have a Heineken, please.
Oh, the slush and sleaze of it, Midtown in a buzz.
Ten years ago this was a playground, with slides.
Now I'm too concerned with my fermented insides.
Yes, I'll call for a limo tomorrow, with a wet bar.

#13

Could I have finished the degree I started as a kid?
Clump of dorms, all these guys proving themselves;
I used to love to use the line about being their friend.
To watch snow fall from a heated dorm room, as your
roommate cowers beneath a pleated comforter while
you fool around with a newfangled theater ace: apogee.
The taste of him beneath me, exercise of perfected
strengths, lip muscles, special tender dips, tongue-arts:
then the sudden rush, the presto sense of having done
it again, his mouth open, glaze-eyed look, half-hidden
by this narrow space unlighted, transgression felt every
which way: I've never been happier or more free.
I was a swallower of all kinds of swords, including his.
Then, I'd kick them out, cause I still slept, dopey me.

#14

I had nice thoughts about some of these guys. Joey, the theater ace, wrote plays, and he babbled to me about Ionesco, how what he wrote would be the next logical step forward, into a kind of abyss, and that I could help him achieve this, just in sucks. He'd read the monologues sometimes to us in different rooms and there really were gorgeous passages, and I made him promise to keep in touch. For a few months he was working in the Lower East Side and there was some interest. Now he works in real estate, and says that money seems more permanent than art. Hank was the resident guitar genius, of course I not only blew him but slept with him, and he wrote me country rock songs in the manner of the Eagles. His studded belt now catches third graders, mortgage bills.

#15

I need a limo to take me to the grocery store:
that would be especially glamorous. Groupie
in the back seat, long cascades of blonde hair
with ringlets at the front, midriff shirt, hands
pressed down my pants, mouth slightly ajar
from booze and painkiller combos, so that I'd
be fiddled with in the few minutes before I'd
have to enter Shop-Rite for orange juice, pickles,
chicken tenders, spaghetti, red sauce, milk, all
because my real bitch, she of the fat ass, thunder
thighs, sudden whims, might have a midnight
hankering for Neapolitan, as I myself now have
more or less three streaks: shit brown, eyeball
white, strawberry red, so I still change stripes.

#16

O, deadbeat me; snug as a bug in a rug, stoned.
I might eat this Neapolitan all myself, so soft, so
creamy, so like the life I deserve but do not have.
How be mad? She both has the kids (we're sure to
have a bunch, I've got this unbridled potency, she's
short enough we can do it standing up, maybe in the
bathroom at Manny's, as they roll out the Al Green
covers on karaoke night), works, am I a jerk to be
basking in the privileges of almost father hood?
At least I'm still— what's the word— continent, at
least I can wait to jerk off until she's not around.
We should have parties here with the Manny's girls.
It would liven up these awful wood-floored rooms.
It always feels like the first time with Manny's girls.

#17

He picks up the shitty guitar, puts his hand where G chord is supposed to be, begins to strum. He wants to sing Wonderful Tonight to put him in a romantic mood for her return but stumbles going from D to C. So he just thrashes away on G, improvises words about ex-girlfriends and this one, who (let's face it) might as well be. He changes tempo every few bars to make things interesting, makes it to D, and voila, he's a rock star once again. Backstage, he fends off the usual radio/record company folk, tells his guitar tech where he wants his guitars kept from now on, gets the road manager to round up his girls for a private session in the cramped but impeccably catered dressing room (pigs in blankets, cold cut spreads, apple fritters), plays food games with the girls, but (oops!) this really is the guy from the big magazine, time for an interview, see you later, girls.

#18

She gets home to find him asleep, a tableaux: mouth
slightly ajar, glasses laid on the night table, still in his
Yankees cap, to hide the shaming baldness he found
repels the Manny's girls— they of the pinkish lips,
truly tight asses, who hang around Staten Island
as though Manhattan were a distant dream; lays of
Italian dudes in leisure suits in backs of dusty
Japanese cars. This, her sort-of husband, is the kind
of kid she never would've taken seriously when she
had her looks, when her black bangs melded with
her face's perfect oval to sear her image onto so many
groins she thinks she can still see the plaintive glances.
Ice cream, she thinks, she needs ice cream, dissolutions
in sugar and cream to give her the rightful death of this.

#19

As she spoons the stuff into her mouth, wishing *he* tasted like this, she remembers that musical she was in, in high school: *Fiddler on the Roof*. It's that song Tevya sings that tweaks her: "If I were a Rich Man." *That's right, Tevya, you and the rest of the world*. She thinks to herself, Tevya at least got to be the star of the musical, I got caught in the chorus. To think of having to get in those cut-cloth get-ups to be in all these scenes, just to lurk in the fucking chorus: I should've quit when the cast list went up. "Cast list" intoxicates her brain with possibilities, a sense that maybe there will be more cast lists somehow in the future: she could start doing theater, maybe finally break through with something creative. Moms sometimes still do creative things. She builds him into the He-Man he isn't; that he can and must be responsible, a mensch behind the wheel, a stud in bed, safe as milk for the kids, even chucking their diapers.

#20

There was the lunch reverie about college and then this dinner reverie about high school: I feel like a crab, going backwards. How can I move forward again? In the end, I know it's me and the kid alone. It said in the paper today they have a new bill that requires everyone to receive Health Insurance. Does that mean I can kick his sorry ass out, and not worry that he'll wind up with a needle in his arm in Tompkins Square Park? Am I beholden to him forever for a few good shots? Here, she pauses to cry, thinking of him prowling the East Village, as he was when she picked him up for the first time. He was so innocent and so charming, throwing in little quotes from all these love sonnets his girls wrote for him. She had convinced herself that stability was latent in him. The baby-like white of his bare torso depressed her, even if it heralded (she had decided) a noble, creative existence.

#21

The thing about Manny's, he thinks, is that it's a tiny
bar with a tiny mentality but no one here quite realizes
it: the girls in halter-tops do their hair-flips, the Italian
guys insist on different key points about the Giants,
but the girls in halter-tops can't do anything in the
world but hook-up with these leisure suit guys. That,
of course, is where I come in, cause it's "fun night,"
so that she sips a Diet Coke, my eyes prowl around,
there's one with black hair and a solid faked tan as
if she's spent time in a kiln. He scoots over, leaving
his very pregnant mistress, and enjoys the sensation
of moving between discrete worlds, as though he's
a globe-trotting superstar, too big for entanglements
to limit his feeling of himself as a Zen arrow.

#22

He wasn't expecting to feel a sense of degradation as
he sat down next to her, her baked skin exuding perfume.
It's the scent of another world, of sex that happens that
might as well be shopping: scent of malls, mall vanities.
It is arousing, he's aroused; her black hair flips in huge
danger waves towards his crotch. I'm intrepid, he thinks,
this is pioneering work, and since I can't write poems
anymore, it's all justified: she wants me to be creative
again, as if giving her a baby isn't enough. He sets down
his beer, subjects this girl to one of his long, caressing
stares, adjusts his Yankees cap to make his eyes visible.
She pouts and, miraculously, is not surrounded by a group
of raven-haired hair-flippers. "Can I buy you another
drink?" She half-nods, looks vaguely towards him, down.

#23

She's doing a crosswords puzzle while he does this, which, he knows, means he's being humored, a willful kid at an arcade, who forces his Mommy to wait. He notices this girl's pink sweatpants and zip-up sweatshirt with a hood, and decides that football is a safe topic. She agrees, and the conversation begins and does many strange somersaults as they both realize what the situation is, that she can make an interception here. He's got the hangman's erection yet, but there remains an insurmountable problem; wifey's got the car keys. If there is to be a hook-up, it has to happen here. Luckily, it's not that cold and he has half a joint in his wallet. They take a hike into fresh air to get stoned. Once out there, they look at the stars, he thinks of arrows going through space, and then he is, for real (for once) up against her, seriously, and likes the feeling.

#24

Sandra, she says her name is, tipping her
blackened head onto his chest, wracked as
it is by coughs. He introduces himself as
Ronnie, who lives on the island with his
big sister. She happens to be pregnant and
is humoring him here at Manny's. Heads
leaned close, she tells him she's got a boy
friend, but they happen to be fighting, she's
out on her own (an errant lamb, in his mind).
Exquisite tensions force his hands to smooth
down her back, anchors sinking to plant
themselves someplace solid. Sandra doesn't
want to kneel, touch, kiss; just this little
grab in autumn's wasted chill is enough.

#25

Ronnie is nearing the end of his rope. As he lays
in bed with Jess, he aches to hold Sandra ever so
much closer. Would conceiving another child (as
Jess's remains unborn) be against any laws? Jess,
of course, not only knows what Ronnie thinks
(she had snuck behind the dumpster to monitor
his progress, Diet Coke still in hand, as though
watching a particularly juicy brawl in which her
big male antagonist was getting throttled), she
knows there will be Sandra, then another, then
another, but until the man learns to earn his
own living he will come home to roost with
her. There: a vicious thought he deserves.
All she vetoes is an exchange with sperm.

#26

Jess's ascension; she rises, both quick and dead, over this many times
(and many ways) bespattered bed, into a scene of youth; utopic suburbs,
bikes with bells, how trees looked in May with not much school left.
Succession of images; diasporas of life, miniaturized, in many directions.
She liked church, then; thrills of new words, "benediction," "annunciation,"
"absolution," and in her streams upwards she responds to a whim that
God is more preoccupied with minutiae than many think. God in candy
hearts, suck-rings, bags of midnight-snuck potato chips, and she hears
what God thinks of this (perverse humor of an imp?), hears herself hearing
(thirty years later) and passes swift, merciful judgment on all things
unborn, liminal, or born. Pregnant women, she has heard, are plugged into
the universe; a cascade of white/blue lights descends. Jess flies, over
putrid stagnant Hudson, absence of twin towers, corrugated Chrysler
building, and this is deep, permanent, blessed with air and fire scars.

#27

Then appeared the angel: not delicate and feline, but raw, rough, determined. She presents familiar scenes to Jess, demands answers. Jess is in a weatherless place, sparked with stars. She starts thus: I know the lies that ride high and roughshod over my existence. That I have looked at many surfaces while motives remained hidden, and believed them; that I have willfully lied to create, maintain, and retrospectively preserve appearances; that I have contrived to fix things not meant to be fixed in eternal patterns; all this I know. But this is all held within the confines of a dream; I will wake up unawares, carrying a circular burden, determined to efface (without being conscious) these lessons. I want to know how these things may be carried across; why I am subjected to the torment of deep truth and abasement. Here, the scene changes; another panorama; Jess tosses within a sense of flailing over Fifth Ave., vacated and loosed from concrete forms. Now she is wrapped, uncomfortably swaddled; now she jerks up in bed to hear Ronnie's snores, comfortably folded back into short wheezes. What's next?

#28

When I woke the next morning, something had changed. I looked at Ronnie, as he dragged his sorry ass out of bed; sunken-in chest, bald head, baseball cap worn (out of vanity) even to breakfast, slumped shoulders that express raw needs, cast out onto me like damp nets; and I realized I could see a path of purity, running out like a lane at a tangent to this. The problem is the mercy I cast out onto others. I'm a fish, born St. Patrick's Day; my parts flake off. I've always encouraged others to pick flakes off of my body. I'm middle-aged; my spirit isn't robust. So I have a fish-maze to work through, that I might expunge this minutely voracious predator, and bear a child, to/for myself. The cost, for Ronnie, is not less than everything: he will be sent spinning like a plastic top in search of a sick-bed. He will again be at the mercy of parents who force black veils over his mouth, crotch. It will have been me to spin the threads of the veil. Meanwhile, the eggs are fried, the bacon ready, orange juice, coffee.

#29

Here's how Jess does penance: she doesn't just kick him out on his ass (in her mind), she throws his belongings into the Hudson, and him along with them. She's moving, she thinks, not only towards parturition but towards departure (from this, from him, into a sacred two-person space, mother and child). But look: he's there on the couch, watching the late cartoons, rolling another bomber she (inadvertently) purchased. She digs down deep for a spine, and there's something there (is there something there?) No more flights backwards: the situation has achieved maximum density. "Hey look, all the little guys in this are fluorescent," he says. "Isn't it a little early to be lighting up?" He clears his throat, ignores her question; laughs at cartoon antics. Outside, a car screeches to a halt. There is some kind of argument, neither is interested enough to look. Twin diffidence relaxes into obliviousness. But Jess has felt an inkling of something, holds onto it. You can't take a vision away from a dreamer, she thinks, but there are (she knows) options still available to her. The first is to cut off his allowance, so that the first tang of Hudson might sully his lips. She begins to prepare a speech.

#30

Ladies and gentlemen, you are here today to witness the reverse of a benediction. This boy, this man-child at best, has willingly fertilized my body. If I curse him, it is with the caveat enjoined that my will has been (and remains) compromised. But the curse must be planted, a bad seed with good consequences, and it is three-fold: against his body, a scrawny, pale, hairless contrivance, which festers in every conceivable vice, funded (in my frailty) by me; his soul, lost in dreams of easy fame, self-expressed in facile, mediocre verse; and his mind, balanced like slow-to-melt snow on brittle branches, worn down by too many dry seasons. I hailed this convocation of angels because I am building, building. The crescendo must be this man's expulsion, orchestrated to resolve in a minor key for him, major key for me. At this, Jess's head snaps up, and she realizes she's been dreaming. Yet the dreams are closing in. Ronnie's asleep too; its five o'clock in the afternoon. The newscaster says, "in other news today, temperatures are down all over Manhattan. The weather is coming up next when we return to News at Five." For once, Jess sneaks a bit off of Ronnie's spliff. Nothing left to do but work. And it's a long sleepless slog to the next rest stop along the winding way.

#31

She just did it. I woke up and she said, "Look outside the apartment door. You got a package." It was all my belongings— a trunk and two big leather bags. "The guitar's mine," she said, though I begged. So here I am on a bus to take a plane, to take a car, back to cheese-land. I can't even get high; I have to work to stay awake. I know that when I look back on this, I'll say "All those Staten Island nights. That's when I had it made the most. I had it all." What am I supposed to say? I can't face a life of work, I have a hobo's soul, I'm meant to drift through aimless days.

He boards a flight to Chicago, his Mom will be there at Midway to meet him. She'll be in clod-hoppers, glasses, inquiring after his health, unaware that a grandchild is on the way. That's me, she thinks, always oblivious because I need to be. Ronnie sleeps on the plane, having snuck a valium in his sneaker. Somehow (he wasn't expecting) it missed detection. Somehow he also managed to miss detection. He'll have a kid, his cheese-land friends won't know. Between children and poems, he will leave a legacy to the world. Thoughts he leans on amid the lightning-storm turbulence, unsteady as random shots.

#32

The gossip goes round: Jess kicked her house-boy out. He's back to the farm. Who will wait for Jess's water to break? Who assembles the crib? The office and the old crowd are abuzz, as Jess knows. So what? She has two or three friends in her back pocket that have lasted, will last. She's too old to fly blind, even if she's forced to hover near the ground (as she is). You should've seen us at Manny's, she tells them. All the baked-skin beauties went for my little man-child. Yet there is an edge of regret in her voice, for what age does to a human heart. Degradations never end— she has never weighed more, and the spics (she thinks) on the train (God help her if her water breaks) laugh at her jerky movements, appalled lurches. But I've got my back up, she thinks, because I passed this test: to get rid of the pest (who is, her friends note with half-smiles, the father of her child). Oddly, Jess often feels like a little girl; her mind bounces around, just like the child within her (who could be either: no ultrasound). She sees the future through her child's eyes. There are joys, panics, outbursts, setbacks, but all impelled by a clear sense of forward motion.
The chorus of her song falls a full step back, and juts a step up again.

#33

It's a girl. Jess names her Marissa; she is given Jess's last name. Her friends get her to and from the hospital. When she returns with Marissa, the apartment (a studio with a bedroom for the child) is stripped of all Ronnie's traces— calendars, pictures of bands, shots of stars. Jess accepts the fate of a single mother— every night sleepless, every day harried. At least the office allows a substantial maternity leave. Sometimes, as the child naps, Jess watches the sun set over unlovely Staten Island and finds it beautiful as Paris. It isn't just that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, she thinks; it's something buried that can be dug up. One thing Jess likes to dig up are her old journals, especially the teenage ones. She always comes back to the same entry: the day she lost her virginity. April 7, 1987: O my God, I did it! That's it, that's the whole entry. She feels the same way right now. Memories drift back: she was big into Peter Gabriel in those days; she was playing in the chorus of "Pajama Game"; the boy that did the deed was (of course) one of the leads. It all happened because he got stuck needing a ride after rehearsal. She was the driver, as she is now. Virginity is a state of mind. Jess feels twenty-three years of filth have been effaced.

#34

Post-script: visions of Staten Island through a child's eyes. Row after row of duplexes; apartment complexes (different color bricks, red, white, brown), places for food, clothes, everything she needs. There is only one deep fulcrum of activity: Mommy. She, also a kind of brick with changes, revealing different things: moments of calm, of strife, of bursts into silliness, a wheel spinning. When Jess pushes the carriage around (a mall, say), the brown, baked girls thank their lucky stars they don't have kids. Yet, they suppress jealousy: something there so rested, composed, steady. Down at Manny's, Ronnie's flame works on new guys. Ronnie reclines on a Wisconsin farm, where he works, unaware that Marissa, when she plays, soon finds out what a "Daddy" is. On the nights when Jess can sleep, she sees wide vistas, open spaces, but with a sense that the angels hold her back. There is work unfinished; somewhere on the horizon, something looms. Awake, she knows as Marissa grows, as her body changes, aches will come that cannot be assuaged. All the questions she has found answers to will be asked again; all the old contrivances will be explored, from new angles. Marissa's blue eyes stick; auburn hair. What sticks is mystery.